

# **Aesthetics and Practice of Topiary Art**

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## **Abstract**

**Topiary is the art of shaping trees and shrubs by clipping and training. Topiary can be traced back to the Greeks with their love of the orders and of formality. From Greece it came to Rome where topiary was used as a perfect foil to the Roman villa. So topiary may be an ancient art but is nowadays a very modern one, as it has become fashionable again in our gardens, where at present it is reaching high popularity. Clipped trees and shrubs can be used in many different ways for topiary work, e.g. as boundary lines of a garden or as an internal layout of garden space; for defining pathways and walks or doorways and entrances; for making arches or creating living sculptures and other ornamental shapes; as a setting and a background for special garden objects. There are sophisticated techniques and principles of clipping trees and shrubs into the different abstract, geometrical or ornamental topiary shapes representing globes, pyramids, animals or other objects. A good result depends on proper maintenance of topiary plants.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Topiary work means the cutting and shaping of trees into elaborate forms (Goode and Lancaster, 1986). These forms may be abstract or geometrical such as globe, obelisk or pyramid. They may represent birds (broody hens, peacocks), larger animals, living statues or just decorative objects (chessmen) and architectural features. More and more, landscape architects are recognizing the richness and charm of representation that topiary brings to any garden. Much of the world's neatest topiary can be found in English gardens. Concerning the laws and principles of beauty the paper gives an appraising look on topiary art.

It has been suggested that the word 'Topiary' derives from 'Topiarius', a gardener in ancient Rome. The Roman Consul, Pliny the Younger (AD 62-110), described hunt scenes with topiary animals cut from box (Clarke 1988) and all sorts of images in Italian cypress. Clipped box was also used in Roman gardens, sometimes cut into letters spelling the name of the master or 'Topiarist'.

## **THE USE OF TOPIARY**

Topiary work enables us to create with living plants aesthetic shapes which otherwise were only possible by means of architecture. With sophisticated techniques one can produce even sharp-edged geometrical forms, e.g. walls of any height, width or length as well as pillars, pyramids, archways and porticoes out of living plants. That is why from the landscape architect's point of view topiary is normally used where free-growing plants cannot fulfil the garden space articulating functions, but where the use of primary architectural materials like stone, timber, steel or concrete is not wanted.

## **Clipped Trees and Shrubs for Enclosing Garden Spaces**

Clipped trees and shrubs as hedging plants have an important function as an enclosure of parks and gardens. In place of free-growing plantings topiary hedging needs very little space. Moreover topiary boundary lines might be ornamented with cones, balls or figures of animals and given a greater appearance of solidity with clipped buttresses. Smaller garden compartments such as rose gardens or herbaceous borders may be

enclosed by lower hedge rows (Figure 1). Special forms of space subdivision by clipped hedging represent labyrinths and mazes.

### **Clipped Trees and Shrubs for Subdividing Garden Spaces**

Extremely low-growing hedges are more or less used for subdividing garden spaces instead of enclosing them. Such topiary art leads to ornamental gardening. Some garden plots may contain intricate design resembling knots. Thus the English have their 'knot garden'. The outline of a knot garden would generally be formed by a low-growing hedge, while the spaces would be filled with flowers, coloured earth or gravel. Knot gardens were the chief adornment of the Tudor gardens in England. Later when the French influence became predominant they gave place to elaborate parterres of far more extensive and intricate design (Figure 2).

### **Clipped Trees and Shrubs for Defining Pathways and Walks**

Clipped trees or hedgerows along pathways are especially suitable for creating linear garden spaces. They can invest a garden with attractive quaintness. A path - traditionally of grass intended for walking on - may be a special experience for the garden lover when accompanied by rows of rhythmic planted and clipped trees or shrubs creating ever changing light and shade. There are many ways of planting topiary specimens along pathways: clipped or sculptured trees, usually planted to either side of a path forming shaded alleys, clipped hedges on stilts accompanying the path, relatively narrow hedge-lined walks with topiary specimens on either end, hedging on either side of the walk forming a serpentine avenue or domes of clipped box or yew leading the eye down a long axial path.

### **Clipped Trees and Shrubs for Creating Archways and Emphasizing Gateways**

Out of enclosing garden hedges one can develop topiary archways of nearly any size considering the time for training the plants. Conical or cylindrical shapes of topiary specimens can give attractive formal emphasis to a gateway in a garden. A pair of topiary sculptures can give a charming door decoration or may stand sentinel over the doorway.

### **Clipped Trees and Shrubs as Living Sculptures**

The variety of living shapes and sculptures which can be made from yew by topiary art is limitless (Figures 3, 4 and 5). Already there exist proper sculpture gardens which show topiary work in its highest standard and variety. How to create a peacock is shown on Figure 6 as an example for topiary out of box. But we should not forget that there is the possibility of free-shaping topiary to the garden owners own ideas which plays an important role. Many topiary figures are individual fancies in individual gardens.

### **Clipped Trees and Shrubs for Forming Structural Background and Scenery**

Topiary work may also be used to create a structural background and alcove for statues. For instance the velvet green of a clipped yew hedge gives an emphasizing background for sculptures, garden furniture and last not least herbaceous borders.

## **PRACTICE OF TOPIARY WORK WITH SPECIAL INTEREST IN CLIPPING FOR MAINTENANCE**

Topiary work can be subdivided in three phases: clipping for training, clipping for maintenance and cutting back for regeneration.

### **Clipping of Young Topiary for Training**

Clipping of young plants depends a special requirements due to the specific kind of plant. Annually two or more clippings are normally necessary. Clipping for hedge plants treatment is shown on Figure 1 as an example.

### **Clipping of Mature Topiary for Maintenance**

For routine maintenance of topiary normally one or two clippings per year will be sufficient. Mechanised clippers should be used for hedging plants, secateurs for specimen plants. One usually starts with the yew hedges at the end of August whilst specimen plants should be cut in September and October. The latter should have again a light treatment after getting new shootings at the end of May in the following year. Hedges should generally be clipped with a batter. That is the slope of the hedge away from the vertical. Having such an incline or batter allows the hedge to receive sun at the bottom where it should be kept dense (Figure 7). Box needs clipping once a year in the middle of June. In cooler regions with danger of frost clipping should be postponed since box will collapse if frost gets into the wound. And if the summer is very wet, the box will require a second clip at the end of summer.

### **Cutting Back of Overgrown Topiary for Regeneration**

Overgrown topiary needs the following improving. For instance with yew-plants one has to cut back one side of the topiary right to the main trunk, and the tops of the plants need cutting down to the required height. Best time for this procedure is autumn. Yew will start to sprout again with sufficient growth in the following spring and summer. After three years of regeneration the other half of the topiary plant is cut in the same manner. And after another three years the whole plant will be immaculate again. Feeding of high-nitrogen fertilizer has to be maintained during the whole regeneration period.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Elements of well clipped topiary can add a feeling of maturity and permanence to a garden. Gradually they may grow to precious antiques of high aesthetic value. Of course, they have to be kept in good order by annually clipping. But remember that topiary is a great asset for our urban gardens which are getting smaller and smaller nowadays.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

For permission to include copyright material (Figures 1,3,4,5,6 and 7) I am grateful to Geraldine Lacey and the Antique Collectors' Club, Woodbridge, Suffolk, GB.

### **Literature Cited**

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Goode, P. and Lancaster, M. 1986. The Oxford Companion to Gardens. Oxford University Press, Oxford.  
Lacey, G. 1987. Creating Topiary. Garden Art Press, Northiam; reprinted 1988 by the Antique Collectors' Club, Woodbridge, Suffolk, GB.

Table 1. Suitability, soil tolerance, planting and clipping time of hedging plants.

Name of plant	Suitability for hedges	Soil tolerance	Planting time (month)	Spacing (cm)	Clipping time – growing plants (month)	Clipping time - established plants (month)
<i>Buxus sempervirens</i>	low hedges, decorative ornaments	well drained soil including lime, chalk	III – IV	20 - 30	VI- IX (every 6 weeks)	VI
<i>Carpinus betulus</i>	boundary lines, tall	well drained soil pH neutral	X – III	35 - 40	VII - VIII	VII – VIII
<i>Chamaecyparis lawsoniana</i>	boundary lines, tall	well drained soil pH neutral	X – III	60 - 80	VI – IX (clipping lightly)	VI or IX
<i>Crataegus monogyna</i>	boundary lines, medium - tall	well drained soil including lime	X – III	30 - 40	VI and afterwards every 6 weeks - IX	VI - VIII
<i>x Cupressocyparis leylandii</i>	boundary lines, very tall	well drained soil pH neutral	X – IV	60 - 80	VI – IX (clipping lightly)	VII - VIII
<i>Fagus sylvatica</i>	boundary lines, tall	well drained soil including lime	X – III	40 - 60	VII – VIII	VII - VIII
<i>Ilex aquifolium</i>	boundary lines, medium - tall	well drained soil pH neutral	X – IV	40 - 60	VI- IX (every 6 weeks)	VI - VIII
<i>Ligustrum ovalifolium</i>	boundary lines, medium - tall	well drained soil including lime	X – IV	35 - 40	VI- IX (every 6 weeks)	VI - VIII
<i>Lonicera nitida</i>	low hedges, decorative ornaments	no special requirements	X – IV	20 - 30	frequently if necessary VI - IX	V - IX
<i>Pyracantha coccinea</i>	boundary lines, medium	well drained soil including lime	XI – IV	50 - 60	VI – IX (clipping lightly)	V and VIII
<i>Stephanandra incisa</i>	Low hedges	light sandy soil, no lime or chalk	X – IV	30	VI- IX (every 6 weeks)	VII - VIII
<i>Symphoricarpos x chenaultii</i>	Low hedges	no special requirements	X – IV	30	VI- IX (every 6 weeks)	VII - VIII
<i>Taxus baccata</i>	boundary lines, medium - tall	well drained soil including lime	III – V	50	VI- IX (every 6 weeks)	VIII - IX
<i>Teucrium chamaedrys</i>	low hedges, decorative ornaments	well drained soil including lime, chalk	III – IV	20 - 30	VI- IX (every 6 weeks)	VI
<i>Thuja plicata</i>	boundary lines, tall	well drained soil pH neutral	III – V	60 - 80	VI – IX (clipping lightly)	VII - VIII

## **Figures**

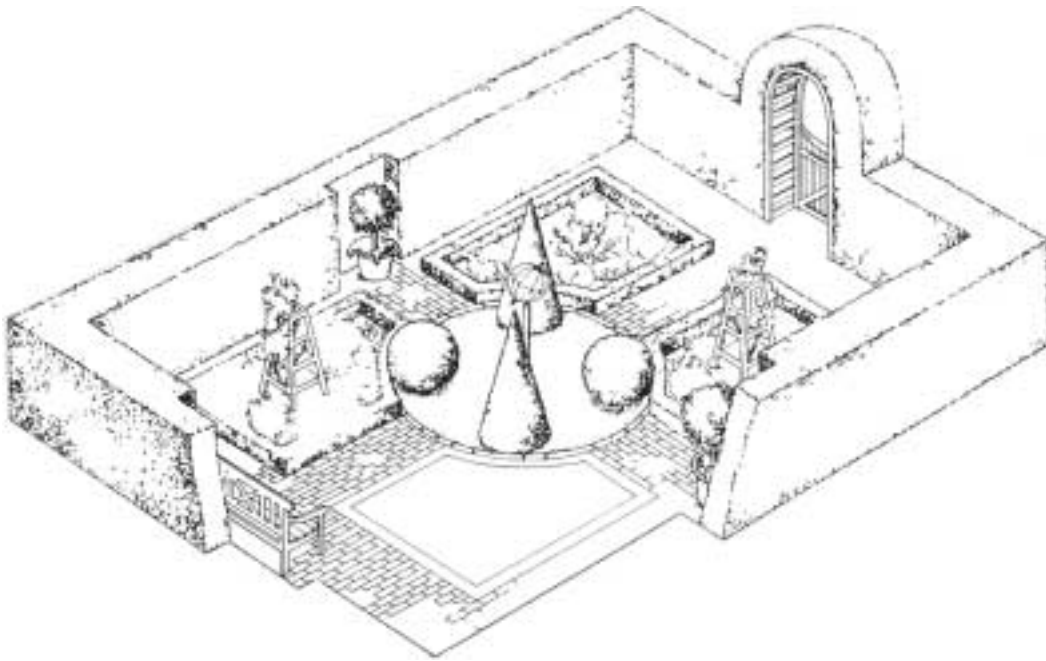
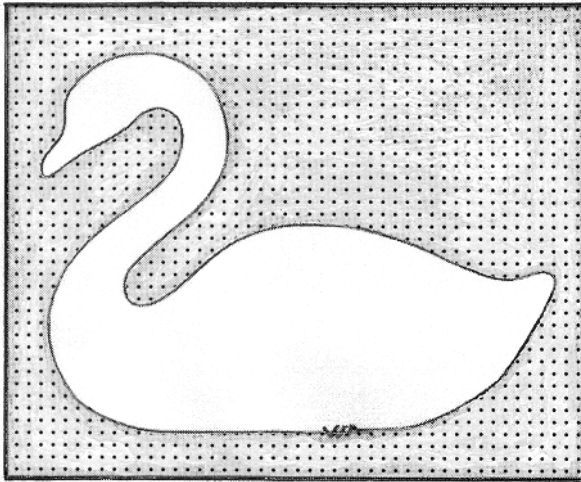


Fig. 1. Topiary as means of design: Hedging for enclosing or subdividing garden spaces, globes and pyramids for emphasizing the defined garden room.  
Source: Lacey, 1987.

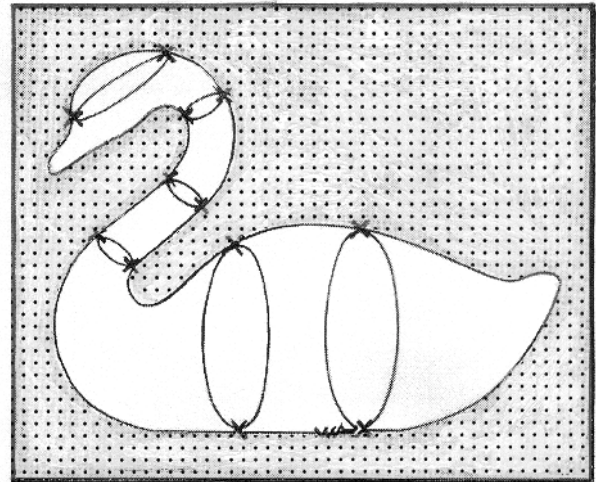


Fig. 2. Elaborate parterre of intricate design at Drummond Castle, Scotland. (Photo Ruemler).

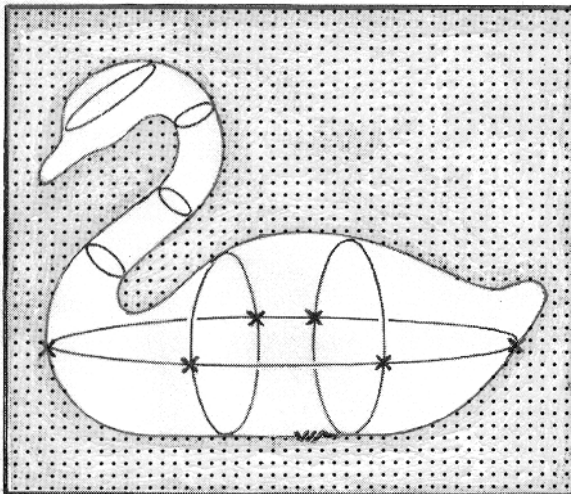




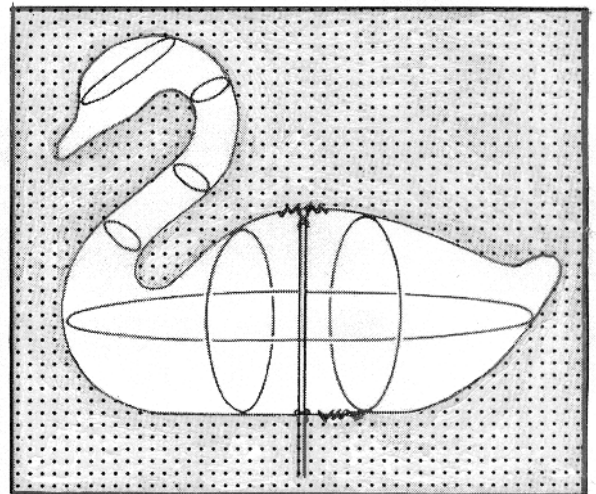
A wire `silhouette` frame of a swan - a simple shape to make with one join.



Circles of wire are placed in position to give a three-dimensional effect. Where they touch the outline frame they are soldered or wired into position.

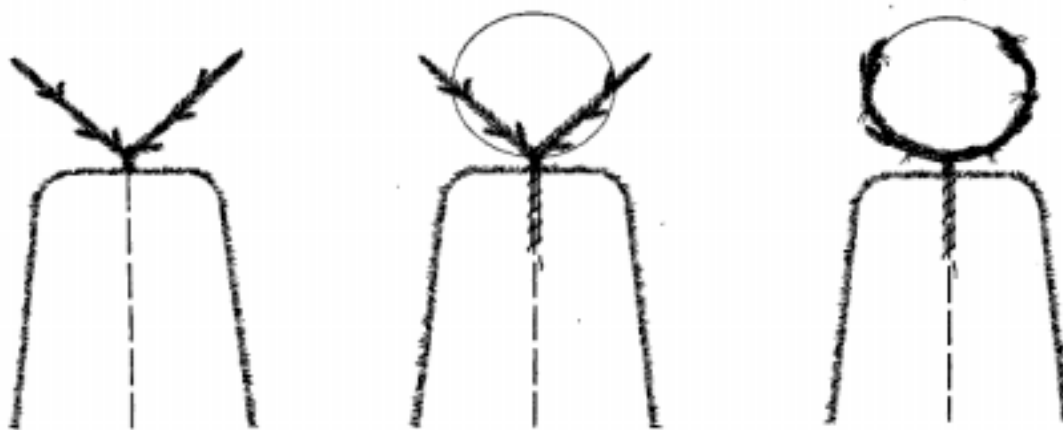


After the circles are fixed firmly into position the final bracing wire can be fixed to the opposite ends of the body. The fixing positions are shown as stars.



The frame is now complete - all that is needed is a strong metal rod attached to frame in two places which will enable the frame to be anchored in the ground or on top of a hedge.

Fig. 3. To make a three-dimensional swan frame. Source: Lacey, 1987

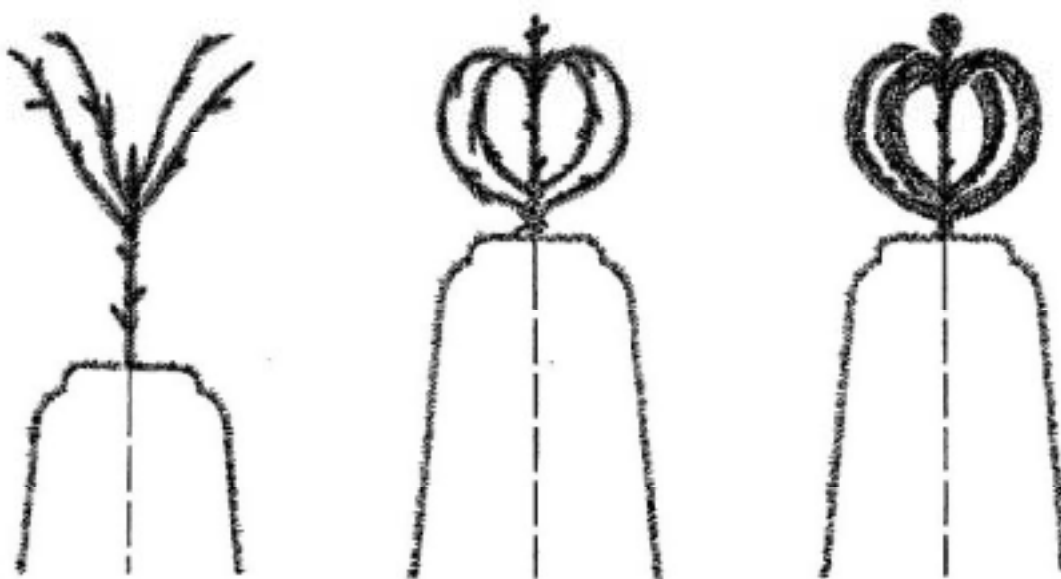


Allow two branches to grow from top of clipped base.

Carefully position a circular wire frame over the middle of base and tie to main trunk.

Tie the two shoots loosely to a circular frame. When they grow they will eventually form a circle which can be trimmed to keep it in shape.

Fig. 4. To form a circle for topiary art. Source: Lacey (1987).



Allow the leader shoot to grow to approximately double the height of the required crown. Remove side shoots from leader leaving only four side shoots and leader shoot.

Take each side shoot, one at a time, and bend downwards towards the base of the crown and tie. Do same with the other three shoots. Remember to space the shoots evenly.

You now have the basis of a crown which can be trimmed as it grows. The top of the leader shoot can eventually form a knob or ball.

Fig. 5. To form a crown for topiary art. Source: Lacey (1987).

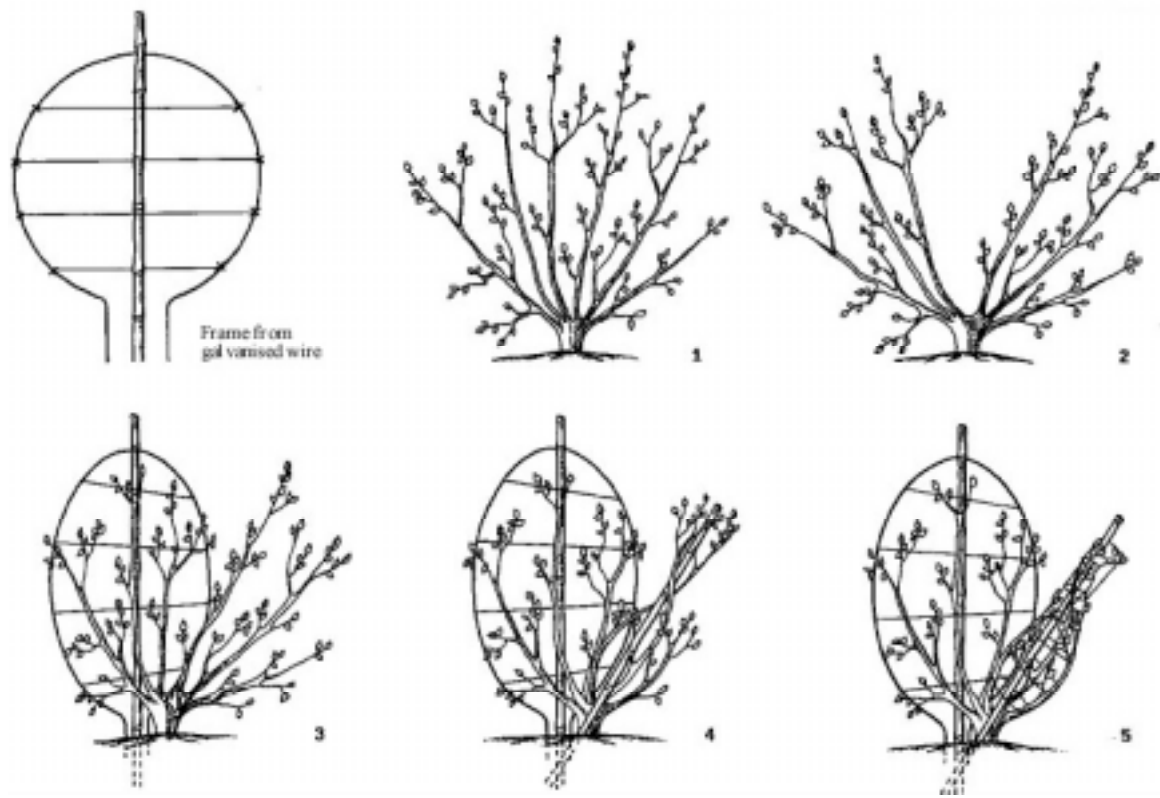


Fig. 6. To produce a peacock in box (*Buxus sempervirens*) from an approx. 24 in. high plant. Source: Lacey, 1987.



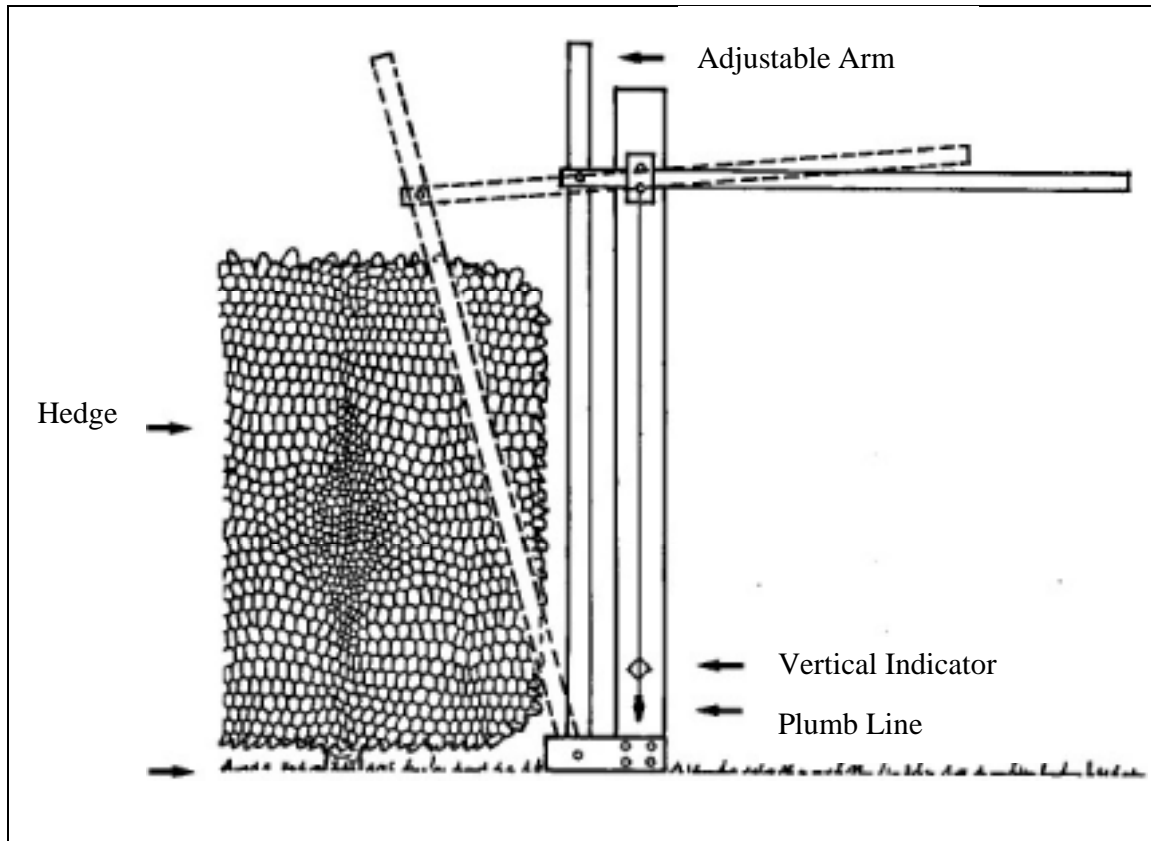


Fig. 7. Device with adjustable arm to assist accurate clipping of hedge batter.  
Source: Lacey, 1987.